

How to Choose a Dissertation Topic

Finding a dissertation topic is so important, and so difficult. Some graduate students are given their dissertation topic by their advisor, or are confined by the data set that is available. Others are left to their own devices and struggle for months. If you're in the second group, here is some help!

In one of the self assessments on my web site called "Do You Deserve a Ph.D?" there is a question: "What is one aspect of this subject that you would most welcome some advice, information or help on?" By far the most common answer is, "I need help choosing my dissertation topic."

Your choice of dissertation topic will indeed play a big role in your academic career, so you are wise to put a lot of thought into it.

Here are some tips to jumpstart this all-important decision:

- Read as much as you can! As you read, don't just underline. Make notes about how each article does or doesn't fit in with your fledgling ideas, how you might use it later, and any other deep thoughts you might have. You won't remember later why you put a big star near the title.

- Start early. If you can use the papers that you are required to write during the courses of your early graduate years as jumping off points, you've saved yourself a lot of time. Be thinking about the potential topic from the day you start graduate school.

- Talk to others. Don't insulate yourself. Run your ideas by your peers and your advisor. If your advisor doesn't like to engage in such scholarly dialogue with beginners (which should be his/her role, but you may not be lucky enough to have such an advisor), then find a mentor and throw ideas around with her/him.

- Use a systematic approach. Organize your search and the notes and references you accrue.

- Look in the right places for ideas. Scan completed dissertations by students in your department or in your field of interest and read the conclusions for suggestions for future research. Do the same with recent articles or conference presentations by noted scholars. Someone has already done a lot of thinking about this, for this very reason - to advance the field and encourage further work on the topic.

- Look at excellent studies in a different area than yours and see if you can adapt the methodology, use of theory, or other aspects of the study to your area.

- "Write before you're ready." This is the mantra of Robert Boice, a researcher who studied successful professors to find out what they did right (Advice for New Faculty Members). A common theme was that they wrote their thoughts down regularly, not matter how poorly formed they were. He found in his studies that a regular writing habit increased the number of daily creative thoughts significantly.

-

Think strategically. The topic of your dissertation will probably determine where or whether you get a job, and how your career will advance. Make sure there is a need in academia for your specific area of specialization.

-

Listen to your gut instinct. If you love a topic, you will have a much better life if you pursue it. If it's not a well-positioned topic (see #7), perhaps you can tweak it to make it more strategically desirable.

-

Don't try for the Nobel Prize. Make the scope of your dissertation possible. You want to be able to finish it and get a job. Elegant, simple research is often the most highly regarded work.

You can do it! Follow these steps and you will find a topic that you love. Or at least like.

This article, written by Gina J. Hiatt, Ph.D., founder of Academic Ladder, originally appeared in the ABD Survival Guide in August, 2006.